DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Office of the Chancellor
825 North Capitol Street, NE, 9th Floor, Washington, D.C., 20002-1994
(202) 442-5885 – fax: (202) 442-5026

Testimony of Michelle Rhee, Chancellor
Meeting of the Council of the District of Columbia,
October 30, 2008

School Budgets and the
The Comprehensive Staffing Model

Good morning, Chairman Gray and honorable members of the DC Council. As you know, in November of last year we announced a change in the way that we would allocate funds to schools. We introduced a new formula—the Comprehensive Staffing Model (CSM)—in order to move toward a more equitable way of school staffing, and to respond to the many parents who wanted their children to have the basic educational services that other children had.

As I reiterated before the Council in April, this change would bring more psychologists, social workers, math and literacy coaches, and art, music and PE teachers to our students. I am pleased to report today that under the new formula we have seen promising results:

- This year we increased the number of art teachers by 53%, music teachers by 55% and PE teachers by 11%.
- A larger percentage of our overall budget is now going to schools.
- More instructional dollars are going straight to the schools that did not have them before, especially in wards 7 and 8.

Much has been written over the years about urban school systems in which art, music and other critical positions are lacking, when just over city lines students have everything that they need from their schools. It is my hope that in future years, *no one* will be able to say this about Washington, DC. Reforming the way we create school budgets is one of the many

steps we can take to increase equity and school accountability in all wards, and I am confident that this new formula will help us to get there.

I. Creating School Budgets:
Change from Weighted Student Formula (WSF) Formula to Comprehensive Staffing Model (CSM) Formula

In the previous model—the Weighted Student Formula—funds allocated to each school were based simply upon the number of students who were enrolled. Principals then created their own budgets and staffing models. Because it costs more to educate more students, schools with more students had more money. While this was meant to create equity, it did not always do so. The fewer children there were in a school, the less money there was available to staff positions like music, art, and PE teachers. Also, we saw a trend in which principals unnecessarily chose to hire large office staffs rather than provide for these and other critical positions such as custodians. In some cases, principals chose to keep staff in a way that was not supporting students at all. For example, some kept staff members who were not only filling redundant positions, but were not even qualified to fill those positions—simply because principals liked their personalities and wanted to keep the employees at the school.

While no budgeting formula is perfect, DCPS has been working under the Weighted Student Formula for many years; considering ongoing systemic failure in many areas, it is clear that we need a more equitable school budgeting process that could hold us more accountable as a district. The formula we are moving to is one in which I can be held accountable, and hold principals accountable, for ensuring that students in every ward have access to resources they were not getting through the Weighted Student Formula.

Under the new formula, which we used for this year's school budgets, we provided the staffing framework for principals to use, including the important positions we could ensure based on the number of students at each school. Principals were then able to come back to us based on specific school needs, and we worked with each principal to fit the staffing model to their schools. For example, some schools already had privately funded programs focused on art or music, and they were able to use the more centrally supported model to provide for the positions they did not already have.

This model also provides a consistent and equitable way to tailor staffing to students' appropriate developmental levels. For example, at the elementary level we added more pre-kindergarten teaching positions. At the high school level we added more guidance counselor positions, and across the system we increased the support to teachers with math and literacy coaches, also supporting schools centrally with funds to hire for these positions.

II. Did the CSM Create Staffing Shortages in Schools?

I have heard from some parents recently about teacher vacancies in their children's schools. As a parent, I appreciate these concerns and understand how real and pressing they are. As the leader of a school system employing 4,000 teachers, I also understand that vacancies will occur no matter how quickly we move to fill them (Even teachers who were available on the first day sometimes retire or get sick after the year begins.).

As chancellor it is also my responsibility to see that we do not just fill vacancies or check off boxes that make us look better on spreadsheets. We also must take the time to fill the vacancies with qualified candidates. A short-term vacancy is more palatable to me than the prospect of hiring a poor teacher, as a poor teacher will harm students' progress significantly over the course of one year. I understand that this district-level dilemma may be of little comfort for parents, when the bottom line for us is that our children need teachers for every instructional moment that our children are in school.

With these concerns in mind, we are working as quickly as possible to fill all teacher vacancies with quality candidates and with a great sense of urgency.

Some parents have asked why vacancies happen every year, especially when districts can anticipate turnover during the summer. Others may be concerned that this new budgeting formula has caused this year's vacancies.

I hope to be clear today that this is not the case, and the formula we use is not likely to have an effect on our vacancy rate. In fact, our instructional vacancy rate is less than 2%, lower than the vacancy rates in both Montgomery and Fairfax Counties.

When we met last spring to create budgets with principals, we based them on projected enrollment, or how many students we expected to have in each school at the start of the school year. However, the challenge for any system is that no school actually knows how many students it will have enrolled until parents register their children in the fall. These projections are extremely difficult to make especially in urban districts, where people move

more often than in suburban districts. This difficulty increases even more in the District, where school choice is a primary component of our education system.

When registration is complete, we then do what every district has to do every year: recalculate the data and reprogram funds to match the number of students in each school. We inevitably see that there are too many teachers in some schools, and too few in others. Equalization, or moving teachers to accommodate the students who need them, can be hard for students, teachers, principals and parents.

However, the only other alternative, which we did choose last year—hiring more teachers to fill vacancies in overenrolled schools, and leaving the surplus of teachers where they are–means losing millions of dollars that otherwise could be redirected into schools. Last year we spent $13.5 M to do it, so that we would not have to equalize. This year, we chose to send more of that money to schools to use according to students' needs. Admittedly, neither solution is perfect, so unfortunately we do expect instructional vacancies every year. Despite this ongoing challenge, I hope that I have addressed the ways that teacher vacancies connect to school budgeting and enrollment.

I appreciate having the opportunity today to discuss the new school budgeting process we brought to the community and this Council approximately one year ago. As part of our larger reforms for the school system, we look forward to meeting the challenge of increasing equity and accountability—for every ward and for every school.